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Regional Republicans: The Alsatian Socialists and the Politics of Primary Schooling in Alsace, 1918–1939

Alison Carrol

Abstract *This article deals with political discussions about the place of language and religion in interwar Alsatian primary schools viewed through the lens of the local Socialist Party (SFIO). After Alsace's return to France in 1918, primary schools exemplified the problematic process of reintegrating the province, and parties from across the political spectrum discussed the appropriate language of instruction and whether Alsatian schoolchildren should receive religious education. For the Alsatian Socialists, the answer lay in the broad reform needed to ease reintegration and was motivated by their self-proclaimed republicanism. Thus the party argued for secularism, which would place the province on the same terrain as all other parts of France, and for bilingualism, which would allow the retention of Alsatian regional cultures. In making this argument, the Alsatian SFIO revealed that not everyone in interwar France associated regional language with religion or believed that republican ideas needed to come packaged in the French language. Moreover, the SFIO's actions offer insight into the development of regional political cultures and the varieties of grassroots republicanism in interwar France.*

In May 1926 the prefect of the Bas-Rhin completed a report on an apparent school strike in the northern Alsatian town of Hilsenheim. The failure of fifteen families to send their daughters back to school after the Easter holidays had been interpreted by concerned local administrators as a protest against French legislation in the recovered province of Alsace, where the government's attempts to introduce the French language and secular education into primary schools had provoked considerable resistance in rural communities. The previous year almost three-quarters of the primary schoolchildren in the Alsatian countryside had missed school in protest at the planned introduction of inter-confessional schools. Wishing to avoid continued unrest, the French government requested that the prefect investigate the matter further,

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and, to widespread relief, he reported that the incident of the fifteen families had not been a strike at all. Rather, for 1926 the province had switched from German to French term dates, meaning that the school year would finish in the summer rather than in the spring, and the families had not realized that this transition would be taking place.¹

This incident offers some insight into the problems that arose when the French government attempted to reintegrate the “lost provinces” of Alsace and Lorraine after their return to French rule in 1918.² Yet the government’s readiness to interpret this mistake as resistance is equally revealing of a clash that reintegration provoked. This clash was viewed by French officials, and has been treated in the historical literature, as the result of opposing French-centralist and Alsatian-regionalist visions of Alsace’s place in the French nation.³ Discussions about primary schooling, however, afford a glimpse into the broad range of local responses to reintegration. In Alsace, parties across the political spectrum treated education as typical of this problematic process. All parties engaged in the politics of primary schooling. The Catholic regionalist Right led the 1925 strike movement, demanding the retention of religious education and German lessons in the region’s schools. Meanwhile, left-wing republicans represented by the Socialist Party (Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière, or SFIO) demanded bilingualism in Alsatian primary schools, but in combination with secularity as the basis of broad republican reform in the province. This agenda ran counter to many of the demands of the Catholic Right, with which the province has been more commonly associated.⁴ But it also clashed with the attitudes of republican administrators in Paris. Thus the Alsatian SFIO’s response to the politics of primary schooling offers insight into the grassroots varieties of republicanism in interwar France.

¹ Archives Départementales du Bas-Rhin (hereafter ADBR), 98AL 661, Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Strasbourg, May 12, 1926. On the strikes of 1925, see ADBR, 98AL 326, Commissariat général de la République to Président du Conseil, Mar. 20, 1925.

² On the problems of reintegrating Alsace, see Paul Smith, “From the Reich to the Republic: Alsace, 1918–1925,” in *France: Nations and Regions*, ed. Michael Kelly and Rosemary Bock (Southampton, 1993), 182–89; Samuel Goodfellow, “From Germany to France? Interwar Alsatian Identity, 1918–1920,” *French History* 7 (1993): 450–71; and Stefan Fisch, “Assimilation und Eigenständigkeit: Zur Wiedervereinigung des Elsass mit dem Frankreich der Dritten Republik nach 1918,” *Historisches Jahrbuch der Görres-Gesellschaft* 117 (1997): 111–28. This article concerns only Alsace, but on the return of annexed Lorraine (reintegrated as the department of the Moselle), see Carolyn Grohmann, “Problems of Reintegrating Annexed Lorraine into France, 1918–1925” (PhD diss., University of Stirling, 2000); and Louisa Zanoun, “Interwar Politics in a French Border Region: The Moselle in the Period of the Popular Front, 1934–1938” (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009).

³ See Joseph Rossé et al., *Das Elsass von 1870–1932*, 4 vols. (Colmar, 1936–38); Pierre Zind, *Elsass-Lothringen/Alsace-Lorraine: Une nation interdite, 1870–1940* (Paris, 1979); and Bernard Schwengler, *Le syndrome alsacien, d’Letsche?* (Bar le Duc, 1989).

⁴ See Christian Baechler, *Le Parti Catholique Alsacien, 1890–1939: Du Reichsland à la République Jacobine* (Paris, 1982).

Republicanism in Alsace had long distinguished itself by its commitment to regional culture, particularly to regional language. During the Revolution the region's literary societies stressed the compatibility of the German language and attachment to France.⁵ This stance was adopted by subsequent republican groups, and when a local section of the German Socialist Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, or SPD) was formed, its first Alsatian leaders embraced the symbols of French republicanism but also the use of German.⁶ During annexation this maintained links with France and fostered Alsatian republican political cultures. In 1918 the province was restored to French rule, and the local SPD voted unanimously to join the SFIO the following year. Again, local leaders adopted the symbols and rhetoric of French republicanism and proclaimed their attachment to the French republican tradition.⁷ This time, however, their aim was to facilitate the integration of Alsace into the French Republic. The new SFIO federations in Alsace thought of themselves as republicans and associated themselves with the republican tradition. Throughout the interwar years the party articulated its republicanism in German, the majority language in the province. The experience of nineteenth-century French rule and of annexation had fostered an understanding among Alsatian Socialist leaders that French patriotism was compatible with the German language.

This stance clashed with the attitudes of successive governments after the province's return to France. While late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century governments had translated laws and decrees into German for dissemination in Alsace, the Third Republic had attempted to spread French throughout the country.⁸ Having been subjects of Germany since 1871, Alsations had missed out on these years of French nation building.⁹ As a result, the stress that the French administration

⁵ David A. Bell, "Nation-Building and Cultural Particularism in Eighteenth-Century France: The Case of Alsace," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 21 (1988): 485–86.

⁶ See David Allen Harvey, *Constructing Class and Nationality in Alsace, 1830–1945* (DeKalb, IL, 2001); and Jean-Claude Richez et al., *Jacques Peirotes et le socialisme en Alsace: 1869–1935* (Strasbourg, 1989).

⁷ See Alison Carrol, "Socialism and National Identity in Alsace from Reichsland to République, 1890–1921," *European History Quarterly* 40 (2010): 57–78.

⁸ On the language policies of the late eighteenth century, see David A. Bell, "Lingua Populi, Lingua Dei: Language, Religion, and the Origins of French Revolutionary Nationalism," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 1414. On regional language in the nineteenth century, see Timothy Baycroft, *Culture, Identity, and Nationalism: French Flanders in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Woodbridge, 2004). On the Third Republic, see esp. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, CA, 1976); and Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany* (Princeton, NJ, 1993).

⁹ On this period in Alsace, see Detmar Klein, "Battleground of Cultures: 'Politics of Identities' and the National Question in Alsace under German Imperial Rule (1870–1914)" (PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2004); and Dan P. Silverman, *Reluctant Union: Alsace-Lorraine*

placed on the use of French came as a surprise to all political parties in Alsace after 1918. For the French government, however, Alsace's proximity to Germany, combined with an Alsatian separatist movement underwritten with German funds, made the dissemination of French in the recovered provinces the central political priority of the interwar years.¹⁰

Another problem associated with the German language was the connection made in the Third Republic between regional language and the Catholic Church. For the republicans of the early Third Republic, the dissemination of French had reduced the influence of the Catholic clergy. Taking up the Radicals' anticlerical position, the SFIO worked hard to eliminate religious instruction from Alsatian schools and to secure the separation of church and state in the recovered provinces. But the Socialists did not adopt the Radicals' stance on language. Instead, throughout the interwar years the SFIO sought to dissociate the German language from the Catholic Church and to present German as the language of regional republicanism. This effort had significant implications for the party's attitude toward schooling, inasmuch as Socialist leaders argued that German, the province's majority language, should have an important place in the school curriculum. This stance resulted from historical circumstances that had fostered a strong commitment to regional culture and language. For the Left, it allowed the development of a distinctly regional republicanism based on the assumption that republican ideas did not need to be packaged in French.

The political importance of language and religion in the arena of primary schooling was compounded by prevailing understandings of the role of education in nation building. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries European states had begun to construct national systems of education as part of efforts to forge national cultures and spread national languages.¹¹ In the lively debate on nation building in France, scholars have assigned primary schools a pivotal role in the creation of identities, the dissemination of French, and the adoption of national values.¹² Alsace, with its complex political ties to France

and *Imperial Germany, 1871–1918* (London, 1972). On annexed Lorraine, see François Roth, *La Lorraine annexée: Etude sur la présidence de Lorraine dans l'Empire allemand (1870–1918)* (Nancy, 1976).

¹⁰ On the Alsatian separatists, see Philip Bankwitz, *Alsatian Autonomist Leaders, 1919–1947* (Lawrence, KS, 1978).

¹¹ See Robert Gildea, "Hierarchies of Culture," in *Barricades and Borders: Europe, 1800–1914* (Oxford, 1987), 104–40; and Abigail Green, "Educating Patriots," in *Fatherlands: State-Building and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, 2001), 189–222.

¹² On the role of schooling in nation building, see Weber's influential analysis of the "modernization of rural France," which placed special emphasis on schools in which republican teachers spread French and republican values to children across the nation (*Peasants into French-*

and Germany, is unique among French regions. But, as Stephen Harp shows, primary schools in the province were mobilized as part of a late-nineteenth-century attempt to create an imagined national community in Alsace.¹³ This function continued after 1918, when the French administration was keen to alter the system instituted under German rule, a system that allowed for religious education and classes in German. In Paris, this situation appeared untenable in the secular French Republic. In the province, opinions varied. The resulting clash of expectations led the question of the region's primary school system to become the topic of contentious political debate throughout the interwar years.

This article is concerned with the response of the Socialists in Alsace to the question of primary schooling in interwar Alsace, and particularly with their analysis of language and religion. This subject represents a useful counterbalance to the better-known history of the region's Catholic and autonomist Right, but it also offers a critical example of regional republicanism's nonlinear development in France. In Alsace, in response to a series of challenges throughout the interwar years, the Socialists forged a version of republicanism identified with national ideology. The first section of the article traces developments in primary education before 1918 and the status of the French and German languages in the province. It then addresses the relationship between church and state and the evolution of electoral politics after Alsace's reintegration. The second section discusses how the Socialists' attitude toward language and religion shaped the party's response to the new French governments' programs to regulate schooling in Alsace in the 1920s. The final section examines the SFIO's tactics in the 1930s, when the altered political context led the party to renovate its program for education by increasing its focus on religion. Throughout, the SFIO demonstrated a regional sense of Frenchness that is revealing of the tensions and varieties of interwar French republicanism.

Alsatian primary schools presented a particular problem for the French government after 1918. First, they had missed out on the changes made to the French system between 1871 and 1918, when education had been

men, esp. "Civilizing in Earnest: Schools and Schooling," 303–38). Recent work has nuanced this picture, highlighting the coexistence of regional and national identities learned in school. See Jean-François Chanet, *L'école républicaine et les petites patries, 1879–1940* (Paris, 1990); Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France: The Politics of Schooling* (Cambridge, 1996); Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Ils apprenaient la France* (Paris, 1997); and Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales* (Paris, 1999).

¹³ See Stephen Harp, *Learning to Be Loyal: Primary Schooling as Nation Building in Alsace and Lorraine, 1850–1940* (DeKalb, IL, 1998). See also Roland Pfefferkorn, "L'Alsace-Moselle: Un statut scolaire non-laïque," *Revue des sciences sociales* 38 (2007): 158–71; and Jules Senger, *Bismarck chez Jules Ferry: Le problème scolaire en Alsace et en Lorraine, le régime confessionnel, le bilinguisme* (Paris, 2001).

a plank in the republican platform of reform.¹⁴ In the 1880s Premier Jules Ferry's laws had made French primary education free, secular, and compulsory, and Emile Combes's ministry had banned religious orders from teaching in 1904. The following year the government abrogated the Napoleonic Concordat, instituting the separation of church and state in France. After 1871, moreover, primary schools had become an important means of spreading the French language in areas where Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Flemish, or Basque were predominant.¹⁵ As a result of these reforms, primary education became associated with the republican manifesto of centralization, characterized by a standardized curriculum, a uniform language, and secularity.

Second, the German Reich had not modified the Loi Falloux, introduced by the French in 1850 to ensure the priority of religious education in France's primary schools. The Reich's main project had been to make attendance at primary schools obligatory, and the Alsatian curriculum remained distinct from the programs used in the other German states. The German administration had, however, maintained both the stress on religious instruction and the divisions between Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish pupils. Thus, when Alsace-Lorraine was returned to French rule in 1918, the government was faced with an education system very different from the one in place across the rest of the country.

The problems that these differences posed to educational reformers were compounded by the province's distinctive linguistic situation. On their arrival in Alsace, French administrators expressed surprise at the widespread use of German. Most Alsatians spoke the Alsatian dialect rather than High German, but regional variations and the lack of a coherent written form meant that German was habitually used in communications and in the press across the two Alsatian departments.¹⁶ As Paul Bastier, subprefect of Sélestat, noted in 1925: "The main German claim on Alsace results from the Alsatians speaking German dialect. Therefore, in Alsace, the political problem is actually a linguistic problem."¹⁷ Such associations among the Alsatian dialect, the German language, and German national identity rendered the need to teach French to the Alsatians more urgent than earlier efforts to teach it to regional populations in Flanders, Brittany, and Provence.¹⁸ Despite

¹⁴ See Robert Gildea, "The Republican Church," in *Education in Provincial France, 1800–1914: A Study of Three Departments* (Oxford, 1983), 254–81.

¹⁵ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 310–14.

¹⁶ See Léon Strauss, "L'Alsace de 1918 à 1945: D'une libération à l'autre," in *La presse en Alsace au XX^e siècle*, ed. Hildegard Chatellier and Monique Mombert (Strasbourg, 2002).

¹⁷ ADBR, 286D 46, Sous-préfet de Sélestat to Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Oct. 29, 1925.

¹⁸ Laird Boswell notes that German was "the language of the enemy" ("Franco-Alsatian

increases in French usage during the interwar years, by 1931 just 5.6 percent of Alsatians spoke only French, and barely half of them spoke “some French,” while 43.9 percent spoke only the Alsatian dialect or German.¹⁹ A British diplomat stationed in Strasbourg in 1930 recorded his surprise that “everyone, even French officials, seemed to be speaking German.”²⁰ French usage was still uncommon enough in 1939 that children who were evacuated received free French-German dictionaries and French grammar books intended, according to an anonymous note in the file, to allow them to “learn French.”²¹ Yet the introduction of the language had been a central component of the Alsatian policy of almost all interwar governments. Various administrations had implemented programs to promote the use of French, but concern over popular opinion in the province made governments reluctant to introduce a blanket policy.

The political importance of language in Alsace was closely connected to the question of religion. This affected how language was approached both by administrators in Paris and by politicians in Alsace. Continued relations between church and state and the unusual role of the clergy distinguished the province from the rest of France. Church and state had been formally separated in France in 1905, but separation had not been extended to Alsace, where the Napoleonic Concordat, regulating the church-state relationship and state payment for church ministers, remained in force. Given the importance of separation in the Third Republic, the question of the Concordat was a crucial issue in the province’s reintegration. More than a decade afterward, one French periodical described the religious question as “the principal difficulty of the Alsatian problem.”²² Additional problems arose because of the Catholic clergy’s unusual political importance in Alsace. In 1871 members of the Alsatian social and political elite had left the province for France rather than become German citizens.²³ In their absence, many priests took on a political role. In 1874 eight of the eleven Alsatian deputies belonged to the Catholic party, including the

Conflict and the Crisis of National Sentiment during the Phony War,” *Journal of Modern History* 71 [1999]: 583).

¹⁹ Rossé et al., *Das Elsass*, 4:199.

²⁰ National Archives (hereafter NA), FO371/14901 (W13614), Foreign Office Commander Maxs, Dec. 18, 1930.

²¹ Harp, *Learning to Be Loyal*, 200.

²² Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), F7 13391, Henri Leger, “En Alsace: La question religieuse,” *L’homme libre*, Jan. 21, 1929.

²³ The option clause of the Treaty of Frankfurt gave the citizens of Alsace and Moselle the right to retain French citizenship if they left the province within twelve months of the treaty’s ratification. For a comprehensive analysis, see Alfred Wahl, *L’option et l’émigration des Alsaciens-Lorrains, 1871–1872* (Paris, 1972).

bishop of Strasbourg and five other priests.²⁴ The clergy's political visibility declined slightly in the later years of annexation, then rose in 1918 when the ruling elite again left the province, this time for Germany. The province also contained a significant Protestant minority, 26.5 percent of the regional population in 1919 and 21.4 percent in 1931.²⁵ The largely urban Jewish population constituted 1.9 percent of the population in 1919 and 1.7 percent in 1931.²⁶

Such linguistic and religious confluences throughout the interwar years contributed to a distinct regionalization of local politics. The majority of the population could not read the national French press, so regional publications that tended to focus on Alsatian issues were predominant. Moreover, political meetings were held in Alsatian; external speakers needed either to speak German or to have their speeches translated from French.²⁷ This discouraged non-Alsatian speakers from attending the meetings and contributed further to the regionalization of politics. The SFIO, like its rival parties, used German in its press, at political meetings, and in its publications. Equally, the enduring strength of organized religion affected party politics. Local police reports stress the obedience that the clergy commanded.²⁸ In elections, abstention from voting was low in largely Catholic areas, and all parties found it difficult to organize political meetings during religious festivals.²⁹

The peculiar interplay of cultural particularities was compounded by the existence of separate Alsatian parties. The Alsatian Socialists were the only regional party to join an existing French party. Its main rival during the period of German rule, the Catholic Center of Alsace-Lorraine, created a new party in 1919, arguing that no major Catholic grouping in France shared its preoccupations.³⁰ Named the Union Populaire Républicaine (UPR), it retained the Center's social Catholicism and demanded the retention of Alsatian regionalist features,

²⁴ Malcolm Anderson, "Regional Identity and Political Change: The Case of Alsace from the Third to the Fifth Republic," *Political Studies* 20 (1972): 20.

²⁵ Jean-Pierre Kintz, "Vers une autre économie et une autre société," in *L'histoire de l'Alsace de 1900 à nos jours*, ed. Philippe Dollinger (Toulouse, 1979), 179. See also Marc Lienhard, "Le protestantisme alsacien entre 1918 et 1939: Compte rendu d'une table ronde," *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français* 122 (1976): 618–30.

²⁶ Kintz, "Vers une autre économie," 179.

²⁷ Correspondence from the Bas-Rhin SFIO's women's section describes the difficulty of obtaining external speakers. See Office Universitaire de Recherche Socialiste (hereafter OURS), Fonds SFIO 41, Liste 1, Dossier 21, Paulette Penner to Suzanne Buisson, Strasbourg, Jan. 17, 1938.

²⁸ AN, F7 12755, Commissaire spéciale de Mulhouse, Rapport mensuel, May 31, 1928.

²⁹ During the interwar years, overwhelmingly Catholic areas such as Obernai, Sélestat, Rosheim, and Seltz recorded low levels of abstention from voting in elections. On the reasons to avoid religious festivals, see the reports of the Bas-Rhin women's section, OURS, Fonds SFIO, Liste 1, Dossier 21, Liselotte Wenher, Strasbourg, Feb. 20, 1939.

³⁰ Baechler, *Le Parti Catholique Alsacien*, 239.

notably the Concordat and the use of German. Fewer members of the clergy held leadership positions in the UPR than they had in the Center, but the party maintained close links with the Catholic Church.³¹ Meanwhile, many former Liberals constituted the Parti Républicain Démocratique, which insisted on regional decentralization and the postponement of the introduction of separation, and a section of the Parti Radical et Radical Socialiste, which represented the Radical program in the region.³²

In December 1920 the majority of Socialist militants left the SFIO to form the Section Française de l'Internationale Communiste, later the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). The Alsatian Socialist federations, particularly the sections in the Bas-Rhin, lost militants and leaders.³³ By 1921 the Communist section in the Bas-Rhin had about four thousand members, the fifth-highest departmental total in France, and dwarfed the remaining Socialist membership of one thousand.³⁴ The PCF in Alsace distinguished itself from the SFIO not only in its attitude toward the Communist International but also in its national position. The Alsatian Communists argued in favor of self-determination for the population of Alsace-Lorraine, denounced French imperialism, and demanded Alsatian neutrality. This stance created a clash with the pro-French SFIO that proved difficult for the two parties to resolve. It also led to the expulsion of the PCF's two leaders, Charles Hueber and Jean-Pierre Mourer, for granting the national question higher priority than class struggle.³⁵

Politics in Alsace were affected by the development of autono-

³¹ Christian Baechler has written comprehensively on the UPR. On clerical leadership in the party, see "L'abbé Wetterlé, un prêtre patriote et libéral (1861–1931)," *Archives de l'Eglise de l'Alsace* 45 (1986): 243–86; "Le clergé alsacien et la politique, 1871–1939," *Revue d'Alsace* 111 (1985): 125–48; "Les relations entre Mgr Ruch et le clergé alsacien lors de la crise autonomiste de 1925–1929, vues à travers un mémorandum de décembre 1929," *Archives de l'Eglise de l'Alsace* 44 (1985): 297–320; and "L'abbé Xavier Haegy (1870–1932): Une politique au service de l'Eglise et du peuple alsacien," *Archives de l'Eglise de l'Alsace* 43 (1984): 287–339.

³² Serge Bernstein, "Une greffe manquée: Le radicalisme alsacien de 1919 à 1939," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 17, no. 3 (1970): 78–103.

³³ The Bas-Rhin section suffered the worst effects of the split. Voting patterns at the Tours congress indicate the variety of views toward the Communist Party across the two departments: 102 Bas-Rhin delegates and 51 Haut-Rhin delegates voted for the Cachin-Frossard motion, which favored adherence to the Communist Third International; 29 and 43, respectively, voted for the Longuet motion, which rejected adherence (*L'est républicain*, Dec. 27, 1920).

³⁴ Richez et al., *Jacques Peirotes*, 70.

³⁵ Hueber and Mourer had forged alliances with the UPR and autonomist parties in Alsatian elections. Their efforts culminated in Hueber's election to the post of mayor of Strasbourg, at the head of a coalition of Catholics and autonomists. After their expulsion from the party, Hueber and Mourer formed the Kommunistische Partei Opposition, and later the Elsässische Arbeiter- und Bauernpartei in 1935, before gravitating toward the Nazi Party and taking on positions of authority under the Third Reich. For their ideological evolution, see Samuel Goodfellow, "From Communism to Nazism: The Transformation of Alsatian Communists," *Journal of Contemporary History* 27 (1992): 231–58.

mism, which dominates much of the historical literature on the province.³⁶ Autonomists criticized French policy in the region, argued for the retention of Alsatian particularities, and, at their most extreme, demanded separation from France. Autonomism represented not one party but a movement that permeated the rhetoric of almost all parties in Alsace. It also contributed to the rise of the Homeland League, the Heimatbund, whose 1926 manifesto called for regional administration, bilingualism, and respect for the religious status quo.³⁷ Autonomist tensions peaked in an April 1928 trial at which four autonomist leaders were found guilty of plotting against the French state (they were subsequently pardoned).³⁸ From the end of the 1920s autonomism found its strongest expression in the Landespartei, the Bauernbund, and the Elsässische Arbeiter- und Bauernpartei, founded by the former PCF leaders Hueber and Mourer.³⁹

The political environment affected not only discussions about primary schooling but also the ideological stance and development of the SFIO in Alsace. In a milieu dominated by autonomism, and in competition for working-class votes with the PCF, the SFIO increasingly stressed its pro-French, prerepublican credentials. Socialist leaders asserted that Alsace should be integrated into France on exactly the same terms as all other parts of the country. This stance was accepted by rival parties in the interwar years and has been accepted, albeit in modified form, by historians working on that period.⁴⁰ This position is confirmed by the SFIO's uncompromising approach to the separation of church and state, yet it masks important fluidity in the party's outlook, which party leaders nevertheless presented as a coherent vision of the French Republic. This fluidity was discernible in municipal legislation, social reform, and, crucially, the use of the Alsatian dialect and of German.⁴¹ Discussions about language focused on education in the province, where their intersection with debates over religion came into

³⁶ See Jena Marie Gaines, *The Spectrum of Alsatian Autonomism, 1918–1929* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1990); and Christian Baechler, "L'autonomisme alsacien entre les deux guerres," *Historiens et géographes* 27 (1992): 249–55.

³⁷ AN, F7 13395, Manifeste du Heimatbund, "Appel à tous les Alsaciens-Lorrains," June 5, 1926.

³⁸ Georges Ricklin, *Le procès du complot autonomiste à Colmar, 1er au 24 mai 1928* (Colmar, 1928).

³⁹ Samuel Goodfellow addresses the varieties of autonomism in *Between the Swastika and the Cross of Lorraine: Fascisms in Interwar Alsace* (DeKalb, IL, 1999).

⁴⁰ See, e.g., François G. Dreyfus, *La vie politique en Alsace, 1919–1936* (Paris, 1969); and Richez et al., *Jacques Peirottes*, 215.

⁴¹ On municipal legislation, see Archives Municipales de la Ville et de la Communauté Urbaine de Strasbourg (hereafter AMVCUS), 204MW 16, Jacques Peirottes, Rapport sur la loi municipale, Conférence des maires d'Alsace et de Lorraine, Strasbourg, Nov. 20, 1922. On social reform, see the intervention of Mulhouse leader Auguste Wicky and Bas-Rhin leader Georges Weill at the Conseil Consultatif, AN, AJ30 172, Session du Conseil Consultatif, Apr. 14, 1922.

sharp relief. The political importance of education led the SFIO to champion that issue, and the party's arguments for teaching in German and for secular education offer a window on the regional republicanism that the party forged at the nation's eastern border.

On its election in 1919 the new right-wing Bloc National government turned its attention to primary schooling, focusing first on the question of language.⁴² In November 1918 the academic inspector at Colmar reported that all capable teachers would teach two hours of French daily and that half of all other subjects should be in French.⁴³ In response, SFIO leaders argued that the government would create a generation that understood neither French nor German. Such criticism was widespread, with some politicians and teachers echoing the Socialists' claim throughout the interwar years.⁴⁴ In his diary the Alsatian primary schoolteacher Philippe Husser describes a range of problems with this "direct method," which left Alsatian children to "sink or swim." Most found themselves sinking.⁴⁵ While its argument reflected views widely held in the province, the SFIO interpreted instruction in French differently from its political rivals. The Socialists insisted that giving lessons only in French would have the worst effect on workers, who relied on primary schools for their education. As a result, they needed to receive their instruction in German if they were to understand the lessons.⁴⁶ Such instruction, coupled with recognition of German in other spheres of public life, would ensure that "those [members of the Alsatian population] who cannot learn [French] do not suffer."⁴⁷

By stressing the class-based character of language, the Socialists pointed to broad linguistic divisions in the province, where the working classes were far less likely to speak French than the middle or upper classes.⁴⁸ In so doing, the SFIO asserted its revolutionary credentials

⁴² AN, AJ30 204, Le Recteur d'Académie, Directeur général de l'Instruction publique et des Beaux Arts, to Monsieur l'Inspecteur d'Académie, Strasbourg, Oct. 19, 1920.

⁴³ Harp, *Learning to Be Loyal*, 196. The government also instructed teachers not to introduce German until children could read, write, and speak French in a "semi-fluent fashion." See AN, AJ30 204, Le Recteur d'Académie to Monsieur l'Inspecteur d'Académie.

⁴⁴ This claim was famously made in the French parliament, the Chambre des Députés, in 1927 by a group of autonomists. See "Proposition de résolution invitant le gouvernement à constituer, à Strasbourg, une commission scolaire, chargée d'amener une prompte résolution du problème des langues l'enseignement primaire des trois départements d'Alsace et de Lorraine," presented by Seltz et al., AMVCUS, 125Z 37, Chambre des Députés, Jan. 14, 1927.

⁴⁵ Philippe Husser, *Un instituteur alsacien: Entre France et Allemagne; Le journal de Philippe Husser, 1914–1951* (Paris, 1989), 128.

⁴⁶ *Der Republikaner*, June 28, 1920.

⁴⁷ ADBR, 286D 325, July 23, 1939, Rapport. As the date of this citation indicates, the SFIO launched this demand throughout the interwar years.

⁴⁸ In 1925 the Cartel des Gauches government commissioned the subprefects of the region to produce reports on language use. These reports stressed class-based divisions. See ADBR, 286D

vis-à-vis the PCF, a significant rival for working-class support.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, instruction in German should, the SFIO argued, be complemented with courses in French to allow Alsatian children to learn their national language and ultimately to participate more fully in public life.⁵⁰ The party argued that the only solution to the linguistic problem, which threatened to deprive the working classes of social and economic opportunities, was bilingualism: "The French language must be taught to all, without exception, but . . . knowledge of German must also be promoted, so that each Alsatian can not only read but also write [German]." ⁵¹

Ongoing Franco-German tension immediately after World War I made endorsement of German, the language of a foreign belligerent, a political problem for the SFIO. As a result, the Socialists treated bilingualism as an essential aspect of the reintegration process more generally and argued for the use of both languages not only in education but also in the judiciary and in legislation, administration, and culture. They stressed that French legislation would otherwise remain a "dead letter" for most of Alsace and the Moselle.⁵² Thus endorsement of bilingualism was an assertion of the party's French credentials, as well as a program that would serve the best interests of the province's working classes. As Strasbourg SFIO deputy Georges Weill argued:

We have always demanded that the French language have an . . . important place in education, so that it can become, as quickly as possible, the intellectual vehicle of all the population. And we have equally demanded that, in our border departments, we use and learn the language, which is currently still the fluent language of the vast majority of its inhabitants. On this double principle, there should be neither discussion nor discord.⁵³

On this matter Weill was correct. While the SFIO's stance was distinctive in terms of its stress on class, demands for bilingualism were common in the province. Alsatians from all parts of society called for the use of German. Moreover, other Alsatian parties worked to pro-

46, Sous-préfet d'Erstein to Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Oct. 27, 1925; Sous-préfet de Molsheim to Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Oct. 30, 1925; and Sous-préfet de Hagenau to Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Oct. 29, 1925.

⁴⁹ This rivalry was confirmed at the first legislative elections after the split with the Communists, in 1924. The SFIO's share of the vote dropped by 11.0 percent (from 36.5 percent in 1919 to 25.5 percent in 1924) in the Bas-Rhin but only by 4.2 percent (from 36.9 percent to 32.7 percent) in the Haut-Rhin, which had been much less affected by the split (Dreyfus, *Vie politique en Alsace*, 74–76).

⁵⁰ ADBR, 121AL 163, *Die Freie Presse*, Nov. 17, 1920. See also ADBR, 286D 46, Program of the SFIO, May 11, 1924; and ADBR, 286D 331, *Die Freie Presse*, Aug. 3, 1928.

⁵¹ *Die Freie Presse*, Feb. 10, 1927.

⁵² ADBR, 286D 46, Program of the SFIO, May 11, 1924.

⁵³ ADBR, 286D 46, Continuation of a debate in the Chambre des Députés about language and primary school education in Alsace-Lorraine, Dec. 16, 1925.

mote German, so the Socialist stress on the importance of French also proved popular.⁵⁴ But the Socialists found themselves on their own as discussions about education focused increasingly on religion after 1918. Its isolation on this point came as a surprise to the SFIO, which viewed the separation of church and state and secular education as fundamental aspects of French national cultures. Consequently, it had anticipated that both would be introduced in Alsace immediately after the return to France. This aim was, however, repeatedly frustrated.

When the Bloc National came to power in 1919, it did not attempt to establish secular schools in the recovered provinces. Instead, it issued a directive allowing parents to excuse their children from religious education. To do so, they needed to contact the local subprefect and wait for a response, an often lengthy process. Moreover, the new government did not repeal an 1871 decree that provided for the punishment of parents whose children did not regularly attend school with a fine of up to ten francs or, in cases of prolonged absence, with imprisonment of a week or more. Local administrators frequently extended this law to parents whose children missed religious education; in 1929, much to the chagrin of the SFIO, one father was sent to prison after his son had missed several religious education classes.⁵⁵

Throughout the Bloc National years, the Socialists criticized the government's failure to introduce secularity to the recovered provinces, arguing that Alsatians had been kept from participating in the French nation or becoming French citizens in the fullest sense.⁵⁶ The SFIO stressed that such an obstacle was incompatible with a unified, indivisible republic and only reinforced the isolation that the province's linguistic separation and years of annexation had created.⁵⁷ Like language, religion was connected to reintegration, and Socialist leaders held that the separation of church and state and the introduction of national legislation would ease this already problematic process. They would "make possible a faster assimilation of our three departments into the motherland, allowing secular France finally to show its true republican face to its recovered brothers."⁵⁸ In this sense, the failure to introduce secular education was a betrayal of the French Republic: "From a political point of view, Alsace hoped for change [after 1914]. It became French again, and looked forward to the Republic's return to

⁵⁴ See, e.g., the letters page of the *Journal d'Alsace et de Lorraine*, Feb. 21, 1921.

⁵⁵ *La République*, July 25, 1929; AMVCUS, 125Z 48, Speech, n.d.

⁵⁶ ADBR, 286D 327, *Die Freie Presse*, Oct. 19, 1923.

⁵⁷ ADBR, 286D 349, Commissaire spéciale de Strasbourg (Rapport), Dec. 18, 1923, Report on Radical Party meeting, Dec. 17, 1923. For a repetition of this argument later in the interwar years, see ADBR, 98AL 673/2, *La France de l'Est*, June 12, 1935.

⁵⁸ Archives Municipales de Colmar, Stadt Colmar, Séance du Conseil Municipal, July 20, 1920.

the old country of liberty . . . [but] the French *secular* and democratic revolution has become the champion of intolerance in Alsace; it does not smile on republicans.”⁵⁹ For the Alsatian Socialists, therefore, the use of German was compatible with attachment to the Republic, but religious education in the region’s schools was not.

After the 1924 victory of the center-left Cartel des Gauches, new Radical premier Edouard Herriot announced his intention of separating church and state in Alsace and the Moselle and so ending religious education in the provinces. The SFIO supported Herriot’s proposals but warned that secular schools should be created in a way that could not be perceived as an attack on religion. The party was right to worry about the Catholic response. The UPR and the clergy organized protests, repeating a tactic that they had used earlier to block the proposed separation of church and state in Alsace and the Moselle.⁶⁰ They also circulated a protest petition, collecting 375,000 signatures.⁶¹ According to the Catholic newspaper *L’Alsacien*, 643 communes in Alsace, two-thirds of the total, protested the introduction of secular schools.⁶² Protestant and Jewish leaders also organized resistance, but their smaller numbers lessened their impact.⁶³ Thus Herriot switched tack in March 1925, ordering Alsatian and Mosellan prefects to allow local municipalities to establish interconfessional schools. In Alsace this proposal was rapidly taken up by Socialist-dominated councils across the province.

Still concerned about the potential Catholic response, however, the SFIO avoided political rhetoric in its explanation of the change. Instead, it stressed the practical benefits of interconfessional schools. A pamphlet issued by Colmar’s Socialist municipal council explained that children would attend the closest school, and religious instruction would still be part of the curriculum and would be given only by a master of the same confession as his students. Again using the language of social equality, the SFIO painted the new schools as places where children could associate unhindered by differences of religious confession. This would prepare them for an economic future in which citizens of all faiths worked alongside one another. Far from launching an attack on religion, the school was “an instrument of tolerance and comprehension and will safeguard religious peace.”⁶⁴ It would also put all children

⁵⁹ “Récapitulation,” *Die Freie Presse*, Apr. 21, 1921.

⁶⁰ See Christian Baechler, “L’Union Populaire Républicaine et la crise autonomiste (1924–8),” in *Le Parti Catholique Alsacien*.

⁶¹ Jean-François Kovar, “Religion et éducation: De la concorde à la discorde,” in *Chroniques d’Alsace, 1918–1939*, ed. Bernard Vogler (Barcelona, 2004), 51.

⁶² *L’Alsacien*, Feb. 12, 1925.

⁶³ Catherine Storne-Sengel, *Les Protestants d’Alsace-Lorraine de 1919 à 1939: Entre les deux règnes* (Strasbourg, 2003), 303–5.

⁶⁴ ADBR, 98AL 326, Colmar pamphlet, Mar. 15, 1925.

on the same footing, regardless of social background, which meant that interconfessional schools were the best method of achieving equality among Alsatian children. Here references to class and social advancement that had served the SFIO's support of the German language were used to undermine confessional schools, as the party's approach to schooling reflected its broader political agenda.

Despite the SFIO's attempts to appease the Catholic population, the issue of interconfessional education provoked further unrest.⁶⁵ On March 16, 1925, Archbishop Ruch of Strasbourg called a school strike to protest the decision of municipal councils in Strasbourg, Colmar, Schiltigheim, Graffenstaden, Guebwiller, and Huningue to introduce the new schools. This strike was observed by many Catholics across the region. According to the *commissaire général*, in these towns and others, such as Mulhouse, Ribeauvillé, and Molsheim, the proportion of Catholic children absent from school ranged from 20 to 30 percent. But in the countryside the proportion ran between 70 and 75 percent. Within Alsace, 50 percent of Catholic students in the Bas-Rhin and 57 percent in the Haut-Rhin missed school on the day of the strike.⁶⁶ In his diary Husser notes that only three children in his class in Sundhoffen did not come to school, and about sixty children were absent from the school's total of three hundred. He concluded that the strike "was not general," although the below-average proportions probably resulted from the large numbers of Protestants in that area of the Haut-Rhin.⁶⁷ Participation in the strike was lower among Protestant and Jewish children than among their Catholic counterparts.⁶⁸

After the strike the SFIO attempted to downplay its significance. Strasbourg mayor Jacques Peirottes stated that 73 percent of children had not been involved and that two-thirds of the city's population favored secular schools.⁶⁹ Faced with widespread rural participation in the strike, however, the Socialists now argued that priests had coerced families into keeping their children home. The Bas-Rhin SFIO newspaper *Die Freie Presse* charged that Alsatian *instituteurs* had distributed

⁶⁵ As early as July 1924 the *commissaire général* had informed Herriot that change would be possible "step by step . . . starting with the communes where the municipal assembly, and, as a result, the majority of the population, requested the introduction of the interconfessional school." But he warned Herriot that many priests and pastors would not accept interconfessionality without protest. AN, AJ30 207, Commissaire général de la République to Président du Conseil, Strasbourg, July 11, 1924.

⁶⁶ ADBR, 98AL 326, Commissaire général de la République to Président du Conseil, Mar. 20, 1925. The French government was eager to have an exact account of participation in the strike, so the *commissaire's* statistics should paint a relatively accurate picture.

⁶⁷ Husser, *Instituteur alsacien*, 247.

⁶⁸ ADBR, 98AL 326, Commissaire général de la République to Président du Conseil, Mar. 20, 1925.

⁶⁹ ADBR, 286D 353, Commissaire spéciale to Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Mar. 30, 1925.

Ligue des Catholiques d'Alsace tracts to their students. These tracts alleged that the situation was a struggle for religious liberty and stated that all priests would be imprisoned and all children banned from prayer if Herriot's proposals went ahead.⁷⁰ An article by the militant Charles Hincker described his experiences on the day of the strike, when he heard from a friend that his daughter had gone to the *cercle catholique* without his permission. On hearing the news, Hincker had gone to look for her and had found her with a large group of children, all of them with school bags, indicating that their parents had intended for them to go to school. The children had told him that the clergy had offered them chocolate and other sweets if they went to the *cercle* instead. Hincker had told them to go to school, and all of them had done so without protest.⁷¹

Such descriptions of manipulation, bribery, and coercion on the part of the clergy were not unusual in the interwar Socialist press, particularly in Alsace, where the SFIO attempted to persuade the government that the clergy had misrepresented Alsatians' views regarding the introduction of French institutions. Here, however, the Socialists adopted more urgent tactics, increasingly concerned that the clergy was subverting the reintegration process. Nevertheless, many of these anecdotes had a kernel of truth. Notes to the prefect of the Bas-Rhin described clerical coercion meant to stop children from going to school, while Husser stated that in the Haut-Rhin town of Dornach the curate kept children in church after the eight o'clock service for the same purpose and that, for good measure, the town's schools were barricaded.⁷² The apparent scale of the Catholic reaction gave the government pause. After Herriot fell from power in 1925, his successors proved reluctant to introduce the legislation, and a 1927 *arrêté* confirmed the place of religious education in Alsatian schools, granting it four hours per week in the curriculum.⁷³

While several administrations appeared to ignore the SFIO's demands for secular education, the Socialists' stress on the necessity for more classes in German met with a better response. In 1927 the government made instruction in German mandatory from the earliest grades and introduced a German test in the program for the certificate of studies. Nevertheless, the SFIO criticized the limit on German instruction of three hours per week, as well as the assumption that four hours of religious education, if given in German, would improve

⁷⁰ *Die Freie Presse*, Mar. 9, 1925.

⁷¹ *Die Freie Presse*, Mar. 18, 1925.

⁷² Husser, *Instituteur alsacien*, 247–48; ADBR, 98AL 340, Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Mar. 1925.

⁷³ Arrêté du recteur Pfister, Aug. 30, 1927, cited in *Documents de l'histoire de l'Alsace*, ed. Philippe Dollinger (Toulouse, 1972), 458–59.

the German of Alsatian students. Having supported the right of Alsatian students to opt out of religious education, the SFIO favored more hours for German itself; moreover, it stressed that religious education should be given outside school by a priest, a pastor, or a rabbi rather than in school by a teacher.⁷⁴ The intersection between language and religion reveals the particular character of the Alsatian SFIO's republicanism. During the Third Republic educational reformers had sought to introduce French to limit the clergy's control over regional populations.⁷⁵ In interwar Alsace the SFIO tried to eliminate the association between religion and regional language by stressing that religious education conducted in German did not provide sufficient instruction in the province's majority language. The Alsatian dialect and German were the languages not only of the regional Catholic Church but also of local republican politics. This had been the case before 1871, and it remained so after 1918. As a result, the party attempted to separate local language from religion in the national imagination.

This dissociation between regional language and the Catholic Church met with some success, and the French government did not treat the clergy or the continuation of religious education as a barrier to the dissemination of French. So while in many ways the Catholic reaction in Alsace paralleled the regional resistance to the introduction of secularism in France before 1905, it was the government's response that differed in the interwar years.⁷⁶ Administrations after 1918 were prepared to tolerate religious education and, to a lesser extent, the use of German in Alsatian schools. This shift in attitude did not represent a more regionalist official policy; rather, it reflected political circumstances in interwar Alsace. Within the province the SFIO was the only major party to demand the introduction of French legislation, and it did so alongside an attachment to German that many French administrators found difficult to reconcile with the party's proclaimed republicanism. The PCF denounced French imperialism, and the autonomist movement sought regional neutrality, while in Germany nationalist forces granted financial support to autonomist demands.⁷⁷ And, despite the UPR's regionalist demands, Catholic orders had developed a reputa-

⁷⁴ ADBR, 286D 330, *Die Freie Presse*, Sept. 17, 1927.

⁷⁵ See Joseph F. Byrnes, *Catholic and French Forever: Religious and National Identity in Modern France* (University Park, PA, 2005), 121–55; Timothy Baycroft, "The Catholic Church in French Flanders," in Baycroft, *Culture, Identity, and Nationalism*, 116–38; Ford, *Creating the Nation*, 26, 160; and Gildea, *Education in Provincial France*, 12.

⁷⁶ On earlier resistance in France, see Caroline Ford, "Religion and the Politics of Cultural Change in Provincial France: The Resistance of 1902 in Lower Brittany," *Journal of Modern History* 62 (1990): 10; and Sarah A. Curtis, "Lay Habits: Religious Teachers and the Secularization Crisis of 1901–1904," *French History* 9 (1995): 478–98.

⁷⁷ See Philip Bankwitz, "Autonomism, 1919–1939," in Bankwitz, *Alsatian Autonomist Leaders*, esp. 19–22.

tion for Francophilia during annexation. Moreover, the Alsatians' use of German and their attachment to the province's religious particularities clashed with early Third Republican rhetoric that had declared the Alsatians staunch French patriots.⁷⁸ When these factors collided with the Bloc National's policy of appeasing Catholics, and with the center Left's instability and altered priorities in government, they created a volatile situation. Not only was the late Third Republic less concerned with unity in secularity than is often assumed, but its altered political priorities allowed successive governments to tolerate religious education in Alsace. These governments, which regarded language as the highest priority, were prepared to tolerate continued religious education in Alsatian schools as long as the use of French spread.

Neither policy pleased the Alsatian SFIO, which wanted official status for German, the introduction of secular education, and the dissociation of language and religion. Local party leaders stressed the pressing need for these three policies to the SFIO's Parisian leadership and used the National Assembly to assert their demands throughout the 1920s. While discussing the provincial situation with their national colleagues, these leaders focused on religion. When they attended national party congresses, Alsatian representatives attempted to underline the pervasive influence of religion on regional politics.⁷⁹ In part, however, their preoccupation with religion reflected their assumption that this aspect of their program, not language, would interest their national colleagues most. Within Alsace the SFIO passionately argued that it was possible to combine the use of German with attachment to the French Republic. Nevertheless, the party stressed that republican identity required access to the fundamental institutions of the Republic, notably secular education underpinned by the separation of church and state. These attitudes guided SFIO policy into the 1930s, as the party voiced its increased frustration at the widening gap between the Socialist program and government policy.

Throughout the second decade after the return to France, the SFIO criticized such aspects of Alsatian education as the continuation of

⁷⁸ On the place of Alsace in early Third Republican political cultures, see Karine Varley, "The Lost Provinces," in *Under the Shadow of Defeat: The French War of 1870–71 in French Memory* (Basingstoke, 2008), 175–202; and Laurence Turetti, *Quand la France pleurait l'Alsace-Lorraine: "Les provinces perdues" aux sources du patriotisme républicain* (Strasbourg, 2008). Mona L. Siegel argues that on maps in classrooms of the early Third Republic, Alsace-Lorraine was shrouded in black or purple, the colors of mourning, and that the province became a key repository of French national identity, adopting a critical role in French nationalist discourse (*The Moral Disarmament of France: Education, Pacifism, and Patriotism, 1914–1940* [Cambridge, 2004], 60–61, 139–40).

⁷⁹ XXVe Congrès National, tenu à Toulouse les 26, 27, 28 et 29 mai 1928: *Compte rendu sténographique* (Limoges, 1928), 260.

religious education in German rather than the provision of lessons in German-language instruction. The party also attempted to foster a more republican atmosphere in the classroom. In Mulhouse in 1933, SFIO councillor Risch objected that the catechism taught in Alsatian schools represented “a direct poisoning of youth and public opinion”:

We are republicans . . . and the way in which the French Revolution is presented by the historical section of the catechism . . . is revolting. . . . the French Revolution is one of the greatest events in the history of civilization . . . [but] the historical section only outlines the transgressions against religion. It ignores the changes that the Revolution brought for civilization. A child who reads the historical section would believe that the French Revolution consisted of beheading people, without explaining why that was done. There is not a single word on the great social progress that the Revolution brought. . . . The historical section does not contain one word on the granting of personal liberty. . . . As such, the historical section is absolutely unacceptable for anyone who wants to consider French history objectively.⁸⁰

The SFIO was concerned that the continuation of religious education in the region's schools granted the Catholic clergy undue influence over Alsatian youth. This concern built on an earlier controversy in the town, when the local SFIO council had commissioned graphics to create an illustration of French history. These images showed the axes of monarchy and clergy declining, while those of working class and bourgeoisie rose throughout history until they came together in 1789 in a tricolor titled “Liberté, égalité, fraternité.”⁸¹ According to the *recteur de l'académie*, only five schools in the town put up copies of the images, and the administration did not encourage them to do so.⁸² Indeed, Premier Raymond Poincaré told the prefect of the Haut-Rhin, much to the frustration of the town's Socialist municipal council, that these graphics were “inappropriate” in the province's interconfessional schools.⁸³ Ultimately, the SFIO worried that the version of French history taught in confessional schools misrepresented France and the republican tradition. This concern was particularly grave given the centrality of French revolutionary history to the ideologies of republicanism and French identity articulated by the Socialists in Alsace.

⁸⁰ Archives Municipales de Mulhouse, D1 al 1933, 763, 764.

⁸¹ ADBR, 98AL 329, Inspecteur d'Académie (Directeur du département de l'Inspection publique du Haut-Rhin) to Recteur de l'Académie (Directeur général de l'Instruction publique), Colmar, Apr. 6, 1927.

⁸² ADBR, 98AL 329, Recteur de l'Académie (Directeur général de l'Instruction publique) to Inspecteur d'Académie (Directeur du département de l'Inspection publique du Haut-Rhin), Mulhouse, Apr. 6, 1927.

⁸³ *Der Republikaner*, Apr. 2, 1924; ADBR, 98AL 326, Préfet du Haut-Rhin to Président du Conseil, Colmar, Mar. 9, 1927.

In this sense, the conflict over religious education in Alsace was part of a broad clash between republican and clerical conceptions of "True France" that characterized the Third Republic.⁸⁴ Throughout its discussions about Alsatian reintegration, the SFIO offered a vision of France rooted in the revolutions of 1789 and the nineteenth century. This France, it argued, had been corrupted by right-wing government, and unfortunately the reintegration of Alsace had coincided with the election victory of the forces of "reaction, capitalists, militarists, clericals, mercenaries, and the bourgeoisie."⁸⁵ As a result, it was the responsibility of the recovered populations to return France to its republican course. In 1924 Strasbourg councillor Eugene Imbs had reminded an audience that "during the first Revolution, our ancestors could see a sign on the bridge at Kehl. It read 'Here begins the country of liberty.' It is for us to cultivate this 'country of liberty,' to transform it according to our ideas, as we envision the true fraternity of the people against capitalism."⁸⁶

For the SFIO, the nature of France was still in the making, and the reintegration of its lost provinces offered an opportunity for wider reform of national institutions. The experience of shifting sovereignty had shaped the Socialists' sense of republican citizenship. Yet the SFIO's switch in focus to individual aspects of teaching in schools also reveals its growing disappointment at the failure of successive governments to approve legislation confirming the place of German or introducing secular education into the province. In this atmosphere, on January 29, 1929, Poincaré reaffirmed the *statut scolaire* in Alsace and the Moselle, underlining the place of religion in the Alsatian education system. The entry of a new center-left government in 1932 offered the Alsatian SFIO fresh hope, which in 1933 was partly satisfied by the Guy La Chambre circular that allowed parents to remove their children from religious education by making a declaration to the head teacher, rather than by informing the subprefect and waiting for a response.⁸⁷ Consequently, the number of Alsatian children excused from religious education doubled, although the total was still fewer than 1,000 of 150,000 children.⁸⁸

In the mid-1930s national politics underwent a fundamental shift.

⁸⁴ See Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934–1939* (Basingstoke, 2009); and Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900–1945* (Ithaca, NY, 1992).

⁸⁵ ADBR, 286D 336, *Die Freie Presse*, Oct. 5, 1920.

⁸⁶ ADBR, 121AL 857, Commissaire de Police Burleigh, Strasbourg, May 10, 1924; Report on an SFIO meeting held in Strasbourg, May 9, 1924.

⁸⁷ Alfred Wahl and Jean-Claude Richez, *La vie quotidienne en Alsace entre France et Allemagne, 1850–1950* (Paris, 1993), 130.

⁸⁸ Harp, *Learning to Be Loyal*, 194.

The increased strength of the extreme Right in France and the accession to power of fascist regimes in Germany and Italy motivated an anti-fascist *rassemblement* of the forces of the Left and the Center.⁸⁹ Titled the Popular Front, this *rassemblement* brought together the SFIO, the PCF, and the Radicals. In Alsace the front was dominated by the SFIO in light of the weakness of the Radicals and orthodox Communists, the latter having been shaken by the expulsion of Hueber and Mourer in 1930. The optimistic mood following the Popular Front's formation led the Alsatian federations to reemphasize circumstances in the province to their national colleagues in the hope that a Socialist premier, if elected, would introduce the legislation demanded by the local party.

At the SFIO's Mulhouse conference of June 1935, the Federation of the Haut-Rhin placed the issue of secular schools on the agenda, and former Mulhouse deputy Salomon Grumbach stressed the pervasiveness of religion in Alsatian primary schools, arguing that it extended beyond religious education classes on the timetable. Grumbach outlined how religion seeped into the choice of textbooks, as well as into the teaching of history, science, and morals.⁹⁰ He called on his colleagues to support the Haut-Rhin Federation's motion for secular schooling, affirming the party's earlier argument that its demands were rooted in a spirit of religious tolerance. Advancing the party's contention that the introduction of secular education would facilitate the region's reintegration, Grumbach argued that secularity was the best means of ensuring the "French character of the three departments, to remove all the walls that separated [them] from the rest of the country, and to promote instruction in the French language." Bas-Rhin leader Marcel-Edmund Naegelen reinforced Grumbach's arguments by calling on their national colleagues to support the Haut-Rhin motion and to allow the Alsatians finally to "enter into the democratic and secular Republic."⁹¹ Grumbach's and Naegelen's speeches met with loud applause, and with agreement that there should not be "two Frances" within the "République une et indivisible," before the congress voted its support for the Haut-Rhin motion.⁹²

In stressing the urgency of introducing secular education into Alsace and the Moselle, the Alsatian Socialists again described confessional schooling as a barrier to the region's entry into the Republic. But they also argued that confessional schools represented a way to

⁸⁹ On the Popular Front, see Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–38* (Cambridge, 1988).

⁹⁰ *XXXIIe Congrès National, tenu à Mulhouse les 9, 10, 11 et 12 juin 1935: Compte rendu sténographique* (Paris, 1935), 457.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 457, 473.

⁹² See the speech of the Girondan delegate Vielle, *ibid.*, 460.

“promote instruction in the French language.” This was no departure for the SFIO, which had always stressed the importance of learning French. But the province’s delegates did not also bring up German or bilingualism. This omission reflected their renewed focus on religious education in light of the polarization of national politics and the threat that they perceived to secular education across the country.⁹³

But there were other reasons for the party’s neglect of the German language. First, the political context had changed. The creation of the Popular Front rendered the SFIO’s rivalry with the PCF less important than its rivalry with Hueber’s Communist autonomists, the UPR, and the autonomist parties. The SFIO distinguished itself from these parties by its pro-French, national, assimilationist stance, which prioritized the question of religion. Second, party leaders worried that debate over the use of German would detract from the issue of education and from the pressing need to reduce the influence of the Alsatian clergy. Such concern about the response of the SFIO’s leadership to the local federations’ stance on German reflected awareness of the international context and developments in the Third Reich, but it also betrayed the anxiety of local leaders that the national party did not share their attitude toward the importance of German. As a result, the local party focused on the question of religious education.

The year after the congress, the Popular Front government triumphed in the elections, and Léon Blum became France’s first Socialist premier. The new government soon turned its attention to education, offering fresh hope to the Alsatian SFIO. In 1936 the government introduced an eighth year of schooling for children across France. In Alsace and the Moselle, where children already had one more year of schooling than their counterparts in the rest of the country, Alsatian boys would therefore have a ninth year in school. In response, Catholic politicians, the clergy, and public constituencies launched a fresh protest, arguing that boys needed to work at fourteen, particularly in rural areas. As a result, the government supplemented the law by decreeing that if Alsatian and Mosellan schools renounced instruction in German and religion, boys could be relieved of the extra year and released at fourteen. The government stated that in the province an additional year was necessary in light of the extra time devoted to the supplementary subjects taught in Alsatian schools. A number of Socialist and Radical municipalities took up the offer to renounce German and religion, leading to a renewal of Catholic resistance in the province.

The clergy circulated a petition that garnered 450,000 signatures—far more than the 375,000 collected in 1925—and widespread

⁹³ XXXIIe Congrès National, 459.

passive resistance compounded its force.⁹⁴ Teachers failed to report absences, cantonal judges gave dispensations for boys to work at home whether or not the criteria were met, the clergy encouraged parents to disobey the law, and several mayors failed to inform their constituents of the legislation.⁹⁵ In response, the SFIO argued that the Catholic clergy was again manipulating public opinion.⁹⁶ Now the Popular Front condemned "the agitation organized by the clergy regarding the prolongation of education" and expressed satisfaction that "this campaign has failed."⁹⁷ Meanwhile, the SFIO and local unions passed a series of resolutions congratulating Blum on the legislation. Renewing its insistence that the law was morally and intellectually necessary, the party argued that it would bring numerous new opportunities to the province's working classes, whose children would receive a fuller education.⁹⁸ Crucially for the SFIO, the legislation represented a step toward the "*école unique*, the only possible education system in a truly democratic state."⁹⁹ Again, the party had adopted the language of social equality to support reform.

However, the SFIO response was not as vocal as it had been in 1925, partly because of the party's reduced electoral strength. In the 1936 election it had lost both of its remaining parliamentary seats, and its share of the vote had dropped to 11.0 percent in the Bas-Rhin and 20.6 percent in the Haut-Rhin, from 1919 totals of 36.5 percent and 36.9 percent, respectively.¹⁰⁰ Yet the election also reflected the widening gap between the local and the national SFIO, a gap brought into focus by Blum's legislation. First, Blum's policy allowed local municipalities to stop teaching German. This contradicted the local SFIO program, which had continually demanded education in German, the mother tongue of most Alsatians, particularly the working classes. Second, according to the Socialist national newspaper *Le populaire*, the government viewed the legislation as a way to retain for Alsatians the privilege of more extensive education.¹⁰¹ The Alsatian SFIO, by contrast, had consistently argued that the Alsatians needed to be subject to exactly

⁹⁴ Kovar, "Religion et éducation," 52.

⁹⁵ Harp, *Learning to Be Loyal*, 195.

⁹⁶ ADBR, 98AL 333, Comité Départemental du Rassemblement Populaire, Haut-Rhin, Mulhouse, Mar. 11, 1937, signed President Robert Levy.

⁹⁷ ADBR, 98AL 673/2, IVe résolution du Congrès Départemental du Rassemblement Populaire, Mulhouse, Apr. 25, 1937.

⁹⁸ ADBR, 98AL 333, Union des Syndicats du Personnel des Services Publics, CGT du Haut-Rhin to Léon Blum, Mulhouse, Feb. 15, 1937, signed Joseph Halliser.

⁹⁹ ADBR, 98AL 673/2, IVe résolution du Congrès Départemental du Rassemblement Populaire.

¹⁰⁰ *Parti Socialiste: Section Française de l'International Ouvrière; XXXIVe Congrès National, 15, 16, 17 et 28 mai 1937, Marseille, Rapports* (Paris, 1937), 54; *Office de Statistique, Compte rendus 4* (1919): 10.

¹⁰¹ J.-B. Severac, "Esprits et corps s'affranchiront," *Le populaire*, Feb. 10, 1937.

the same legislation as the populations of other French regions if they were to become true French citizens. These differences did not have time to develop into a confrontation. When Blum fell from power, the law was reinterpreted so that boys could leave school at fourteen but religious and German education remained part of the curriculum. Yet whatever the government intended, its policy had clearly set it at odds with the local SFIO. In this sense, Alsatian Socialist discussions about education illustrate the diversity of SFIO policy in interwar France and show that a loose party structure was not limited to the parties of the conservative Right.¹⁰²

While their stance on language distanced the Alsatian federations from their national colleagues, their fervently pro-assimilationist stance distanced them from their electorate. The elections of 1936 compounded the SFIO's electoral decline, and no Socialist was elected in Alsace for the first time since the election of the conservative-dominated "sky-blue" Chamber in 1919.¹⁰³ Sections of the SFIO's core constituency continued to toe the party line on education.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the issue of autonomism cut through Alsatian politics; despite the Socialists' attempts to distance themselves from it, autonomism had a significant impact on the party's electoral fortunes. The SFIO's self-presentation as uncompromisingly assimilationist made the party appear out of touch with Alsatian politics. Across the region, electoral victories were secured by parties demanding that Alsace's cultural distinctiveness receive political recognition.¹⁰⁵ The SFIO portrayed itself, and allowed itself to be depicted, as a party demanding that Alsace be treated like all other regions of France. This stance contributed to the party's steady loss of votes throughout the 1930s. It also misrepresented the party's program, as the SFIO both envisioned Alsace as a model for nationwide reform in terms of social and municipal legislation and called for the retention of Alsatian culture in the region. Republicanism for the SFIO in Alsace involved the use of German and acceptance of Alsatian cultural particularities. But as the party increas-

¹⁰² On the Right, see esp. William D. Irvine, *French Conservatism in Crisis: The Republican Federation in the 1930s* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1979).

¹⁰³ The label "sky-blue" referred to the number of veterans elected to the Chamber following the 1919 elections. On the election, see Serge Bernstein and Pierre Milza, *Histoire de la France au XXe siècle*, vol. 1 (Paris, 2009), 483.

¹⁰⁴ ADBR, 286D 345, Commissaire Spéciale to Commissaire Division de Police Spéciale, Report on a Socialist meeting in Rhinau, Mar. 31, 1936; ADBR, 285D 345, Commissaire Spéciale to Commissaire Division de Police Spéciale, Report on Socialist meeting in Marckolsheim, Mar. 31, 1936.

¹⁰⁵ The orthodox PCF suffered a similar fate. Its share of the vote dropped from 20.1 percent to 8.2 percent in the Bas-Rhin, and from 13.3 percent to 7.8 percent in the Haut-Rhin, between 1928 and 1932. Meanwhile, the Communist autonomists picked up only 8.3 percent in the Bas-Rhin and 0.6 percent in the Haut-Rhin. See Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika*, 79.

ingly focused on religion, it could not transmit its ideology of republicanism to the Alsatian electorate.

As a result, throughout the 1930s the SFIO developed the analysis of language, religion, and education that it had first articulated in 1918. Indeed, in 1935 the Bas-Rhin Federation passed a resolution that proclaimed its fidelity to the party's 1919 program on Alsatian problems, "particularly with regard to the introduction of the secular laws," in spite of the changes in emphasis that events in the interwar years had provoked.¹⁰⁶ Behind all of the Socialist statements and rhetoric of these years lay two central points. First, French legislation and institutions needed to be introduced into Alsace if the Alsatians were to become true French citizens; this was notably the case for separation and secular education. Second, integration into the nation would occur only through the introduction of bilingualism. For the Alsatian SFIO, the ability to speak French would allow Alsatians to participate in French national cultures. Neglect of French, by contrast, would lead to the province's economic and intellectual regression. But while the French language was a desirable component of national identity, it certainly was not an essential one, and the Socialists stressed the importance of the continued use of German throughout the interwar years. The Alsatian SFIO saw French patriotism as rooted in attachment to the French nation rather than in linguistic criteria. Consequently, it seemed possible to combine attachment to the Republic with the use of German, just as the eighteenth-century Strasbourgeois literary societies had done.

The SFIO's discussions about primary schooling in Alsace reveal that not everyone in interwar France believed that French was the sole language of republicanism. The party argued for bilingualism and for both French and German education in Alsatian schools. It stressed that lessons in German were the best means of ensuring social equality for all of Alsatian society, particularly for the working classes, and also of facilitating Alsace's reintegration into France. It developed these arguments while reasoning that continued religious education in the province impeded its reintegration into the Republic. Rather than associate regional language with religion and reaction, as earlier republicans had done, the Alsatian SFIO argued that German was the language of republicanism in Alsace. In dissociating language from religion, party militants forged a distinct regional relationship between local language and national political cultures.

Histories of the Third Republic often stress the association between

¹⁰⁶ *Die Freie Presse*, Jan. 23–25, 1925.

republican articulations of nationality and the French language. The SFIO's experience in interwar Alsace presents a different picture. The party's stance resulted from historical circumstances; the period of annexation meant that the region missed out on the years of early Third Republican nation building, while developing a strong sense of regional identity that was neither French nor German but defiantly Alsatian.¹⁰⁷ After 1918 this situation was compounded by local cultural particularities, including the widespread use of German and the unusual political importance of the clergy. These particularities affected politics, along with all other aspects of daily life. For the SFIO, the Catholic Church was a long-standing enemy, and after 1918 the party was eager to adopt the Radicals' anticlerical mantle in the province so as to undermine the clergy's influence. The Socialists did not, however, assume the Radicals' attitude toward regional languages. Rather, the SFIO had a long-standing attachment to the German language, a testament to its roots in the German Socialist movement and to its understanding of German as an important part of Alsatian culture. During annexation the Alsatian SFIO had appropriated aspects of French revolutionary culture for a German-speaking audience, as in pamphlets titled *Freiheit, Gleichheit und Brüderlichkeit* and illustrations of a female figure resembling Marianne.¹⁰⁸ After reintegration this attachment, combined with the SFIO's competition with the PCF and concern for the Socialists' working-class constituency, secured the place of German in Alsatian socialist ideologies of republicanism. It could not, however, prevent the party's electoral decline across the period.¹⁰⁹

In a broad sense, the discussions about education in interwar Alsace illustrate the tensions between national politics at the center and regionally based politics at the periphery in interwar France. The Alsatian SFIO forged its own understanding of French republicanism, which accepted the anticlericalism of the early Third Republic but developed an inclusive attitude toward the use of regional language. The difficulties that party leaders had in convincing successive governments of the suitability of Socialist proposals reflected the continued association made by these governments, whether left or right, between regional language and religion. The Alsatian SFIO's separation of the two issues, by contrast, offers a window on varieties of republicanism in interwar France, as well as on the tensions between central and periph-

¹⁰⁷ On Alsatian identity during annexation, see Paul Smith, "A la recherche d'une identité nationale en Alsace (1870–1918)," *Vingtième siècle* 50 (1996): 23–35; and Christopher J. Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsatians? Visions and Divisions of Alsatian Regionalism, 1870–1939* (New York, 2010).

¹⁰⁸ See Harvey, *Constructing Class*, 101.

¹⁰⁹ Alison Carrol, "The SFIO and National Integration: Regional Socialism and National Identity in Interwar Alsace" (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2008).

eral political cultures. Of course, in many respects the Alsatian case is unique. A combination of history, culture, and political circumstances created a set of conditions exceptional among French regions. Nevertheless, the Alsatians articulated their ideas in republican terms, mobilized republican history, and thought of themselves as French republicans. In this sense, they offer a stirring reminder of the ways in which national ideas were reinterpreted at a grassroots, regional level. For the Alsatian Socialists, secularity and regional language were not simply compatible but essential as they sought to reshape the political landscape in both their *petite* and their *grande patrie*.